DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 232 214 CS 207 781

AUTHOR Atkinson, Ted
TITLE Process and Product in Business Writing: Low Faculty Morale and New Challenges.
PUB DATE Apr 83
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Meeting of the Eastern Regional Conference of the American Business Communication Association (Philadelphia, PA, April 21-22, 1983).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Business Correspondence; *Education Work Relationship; Higher Education; *School Business Relationship; Teaching Methods; *Technical Writing; *Writing Exercises; *Writing Instruction; Writing Processes

ABSTRACT

While the classroom situation and textbook exercises are not irrelevant or useless, business writing assignments need a healthy dose of "real-world experience" to make their importance obvious to students. The instructor has only to ask a local employer if the business students can do some of the writing that is backing up in the employer's office. Once an employer agrees, the writing techniques and strategies discussed in texts become important, and assignments accrue an immediacy that never quite seems to happen with simulated business assignments. For the instructor who has not involved a class in a practical situation, it is probably better to stay on campus. A college's office of institutional research will likely have surveys to be written and administered. Such an assignment can expose students to (1) memo writing, (2) letter writing, (3) survey writing, and (4) report writing. They will also learn to deal with experts outside the classroom and will become involved in committee work. There are also other campus offices where an instructor can find practical writing assignments. When business writing instructors involve students in on-the-job writing projects students experience the processes of joint authorship, composition involving a computer or word processor, and preliminary oral presentations involving handouts and visual aids. (HTH)

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PROCESS AND PRODUCT IN BUSINESS WRITING: Low Faculty Morale and New Challenges

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Ted Atkinson
Edinboro University of Pennsylvania

CS 207781

PROCESS AND PRODUCT IN BUSINESS WRITING:
Low Faculty Morale and New Challenges

Ted Atkinson, Edinboro University of PA

When I talk to colleagues who have been assigned to teach sections of business writing, I keep hearing the comment that "I have been forced to teach business writing because literature sections are no longer attracting sufficient numbers of students to fill the four literature classes that I once taught."

For people who feel forced to teach business writing, a prevalent attitude seems to be that business writing is as deadly as freshman composition, but it beats the alternatives: retrenchment, unemployment, and job searches. So, as many face new assignments in business writing, they do it with all of the enthusiasm of a convict walking off of death row to his execution. In short, many are facing the same tired prospects that they faced earlier when literature sections were surrendered in favor of freshman composition courses. Now, however, the prospects may seem even bleaker. We can all remember complaints about freshman writing texts, and these complaints presently seem to be in the process of transferral to business writing texts. These expensive texts are accused, and often rightly so, of rendering innumerable abuses to the English language and filling students' minds with hopelessly simple writing formulas and irrelevant lists. These formulas and lists are accused of facilitating simple-minded instruction and enabling students with moderate retention and talent to earn a "B" and students with quantum retention and talent (the kind necessary to learn the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag) to earn an "A."

While these complaints are depressing and serve only to undermine the little trappings of morale that we all desperately cling to, there is undoubtedly some substance to them. We have all had the experience of choosing

a poor text, and we have all shared in the dubious delight of teaching the list of five things that must be said in a letter that says no. We also know that this can be a boring experience for the intructor and a dreadful experience for the student. However, this does not need to be the case. Business writing can be a challenging, dynamic, and significant experience for both the instructor and the student. There are those for whom this experience may never quite equal the excitement of teaching literature, but it may at least prove to be a tolerable sustitute to even the most recalcitrant among us if some of the traditional emphasis that is placed upon product is transferred to process.

Business writing is particularly challenging because we are continually asking students to do practical kinds of writing. This challenge, however, can rapidly turn to frustration when we begin to sense that the students are not fully, or even partially, convinced that their writing assignments are actually practical or truly representative of on-the-job writing tasks. Upon reflection, we often come to the realization that we are asking students to do such tasks as writing memos to employers who do not exist or writing letters to people they can not know. We teach the importance of knowing the reader and writing with the "you attitude" in mind. We talk at great length about the value of reader-centered writing, and then we ask students to write letters to a manufactured audience who could not be visualized in the mind of someone as imaginative as a Shakespeare or a Hemingway. We ask students to write detailed reports for companies that do not exist and probably could not exist, and when we run out of imaginary situations, we turn to casebooks to replenish the depleted warehouse of our imaginations. What it often takes us a long time to see is that we could just as easily and a good bit more productively be assigning on-the-job situations in the first place.

I would not maintain for a moment that the classroom situation or textbook exercises are irrelevant or useless. This is far from the case. What I would maintain, though, is that business writing assignments need a rather healthy dose of "real-world experience" to make their importance apparent to the students. The organization of a report or the content of a letter that emerges as the direct result of the pressure of doing an actual assignment in the "real world" takes on a significance that few teachers can convincingly demonstrate by making traditional classroom assignments.

While going beyond the classroom for business writing exercises is difficult, it is not as difficult as it seems at first. Employers almost constantly complain that they can not find employees who can write. These complaints are usually justified, and the need for competent writers is often genuine. Grim as this situation is for the employer, it holds great promise for the business writing professor and student alike. Business writing professors have classes filled with students who would like to have experience doing practical, real business writing. These students usually enter class with some talent, and with the guidance of the professor, they are in a position to help the business person who is in need. All the professor has to do is ask if his/her business writing class can do some of the writing that is backing up in the office. It may come as a surprise, but few employers will refuse the offer.

Once an employer agrees to let business writing students get involved in the business writing process at his or her business, exciting things begin to happen. Writing assignments almost immediately become exciting challenges. The writing techniques and strategies discussed in writing texts become important. Assignments accrue an immediacy that never quite seems to happen with simulated business assignments. When a student becomes an employee and

is asked to have a letter ready for tomorrow, it is amazing how rapidly a textbook becomes important and how significant lectures seem to be. When the employer announces that he or she would like to have a report on a certain important matter presented to him or her in thirty days, students do not wait until the night before it is due to begin work. They usually have the assignment done well in advance of the deadline.

I have used this approach many times in many different situations. For the instructor who has not involved a class in a practical situation, it is probably better to keep ventures restricted in scope. It is perhaps even better not to venture from the college or university campus. One can find numerous, challenging jobs right at home. Nearly every campus has an Office of Institutional Research. The directors of these offices always have surveys to be written and administered, and they are usually willing to let business writing classes do this work. A great deal can be learned about the value of using precise language from writing a survey, and this total process gives the student rather good experience with gathering primary research. Reporting the results of the research is also a valuable experience. One such assignment can expose the students to 1) memo writing, 2) letter writing, 3) survey writing, and 4) report writing. While the range of potential writing tasks is nearly endless, the overwhelming benefit that comes from this kind of exercise is that the situation itself rather clearly defines the nature of the letters, memos, and reports that must be written. When one must write to a dean or a vice-president to get permission to do a survey, the importance of knowing the reader and avoiding tactless statements is abundantly clear. Similarly, the nature of the survey questions is defined by the need to know certain kinds of information. All of this seems to be made clear by the reality of the context. This is never quite so clear with simulated assignments.

In addition to the writing assignments that stem from doing institutional research, many other valuable experiences occur. It would be reckless for students to write a survey and distribute it without having it checked by an expert. The director of institutional research is always willing to review a survey and make constructive suggestions and changes. The director is also willing to explain methods of scientific sampling. This can be handled by having a committee from the class make an appointment to talk with the director or arranging to have the director visit the class. At any rate, the director is the boss, and students pay careful attention to what the boss says. Students want their real assignement to turn out well, and they are willing to work long, hard hours to make it happen that way.

The experience of working with experts outside of the classroom is valuable for the students. It teaches them the kind of confidence that is necessary if they are to make any kind of meaningful contribution to their company once they are employed. This kind of assignment will often get students involved in all-college committees, and this also increases their confidence and develops the skills necessary to interact with others.

It is difficult to have classes become involved in doing institutional research without having them become involved with committee work. I once served on an evening school committee, and part of its charge was to do a survey to determine the feasibility of starting an evening school. My business writing class accepted this as its assignment. This assignment involved close cooperation with the Evening School Committee. Another class took the assignment of surveying student opinion to determine if students felt that they were getting their money's worth from their student activities fee.

This class became a sub-committee of the Student Government Association. The committee work was a valuable learning experience in business communication, and it made the textbook discussion of how to run a committee meeting seem significant.

There are places on the college campus other than offices of institutional research to which one can turn to find practical writing assignments. The Alumni Office is always in need of people to write letters. The Admissions Office is always trying to turn that perfectly phrased letter to send to prospective students. The alumni newsletter can always use writers. The list of places is limited only by the size of the campus and the professor's ingenuity. There is one thing that is clear to me--an offer to help will not be refused. I have never had a person refuse to let me get my classes involved, and this is true both on and off of the campus. It has also been my experience that this involvement has been beneficial to all parties concerned.

Perhaps the most interesting and rewarding project that I have done with a business writing class involved working with a state senator, Anthony (Buzz) Andrezeski. Senator Andrezeski remarked to me that he has a difficult time finding writers to keep up with the writing chores of his office. I told him that if he had some writing projects that were of a non-partisan nature that I had some writing students who could benefit from some experience working with him and his office staff.

The Senator thought that this idea could work to our mutual benefit, and two weeks later he outlined some interesting projects for us. He asked us to get involved in the process of summarizing key pieces of recent legislation and proposed legislation so that he could send the summaries to appropriate groups in his legislative district. He also asked us to research

the names of groups and people affected by the legislation. This was a useful exercise in writing and research. However, the assignment did not stop there.

We were also asked to summarize the Sunset Act, a piece of legislation calling for the review and possible termination of various state boards (The Milk Marketing Board, The Crime Victim's Compensation Board, The Board of Funeral Directors, etc.) and get a list of names of all of the people in his legislative district whose welfare was affected by the boards that were named in this act. Getting a list of the crime victims in Erie County was a challenging research assignment, but it was an easy task compared to writing a letter to these people that would guarantee their response. The Senator wanted to know how his constituents felt about this and other boards, and it was of little value to summarize legislation, define the functions of a board, and ask for a response unless we were sure that our letters were designed to get a response.

Our first task was to draft a letter that would get a response, and the Senator was interested enough in this project to come to class and spend two hours listening to students explain why our letters would get a response. Drafting these letters sent students off to do research in business and letter writing texts. Our text did not cover all of the possibilities suggested by the demands of the situations. Since the students did not want to present the Senator with unconvincing letters, they gladly did the research, drafted letters based upon this research, and prepared reports to present to the Senator.

During the Senator's visit to our class, the students got experience in presenting a persuasive report, and they learned some important points about business letter writing. They learned that it is centrally important to know the product his positions had to be stated accurately and clearly. Furthermore,

the students sensed the importance of knowing the audiences to whom the letters were addressed, and they had to convince the Senator that they had written the letters with this knowledge firmly in mind.

The students decided that the best way to get meaningful responses from the letters was to write questionnaires asking the kinds of questions that were referred to in the Sunset Act. Once the questionnaires were written to cover each of the boards that we were assigned, the questionnaires were taken to the Office of Institutional Research and Planning at Edinboro State College. After the questionnaires were revised to incorporate the editorial suggestions made by the Director of the Office of Research and Planning, they were presented to the Senator for his approval.

This project got the students involved in the total process of writing the kinds of letters and reports that are frequently demanded in the business world. Some of the assignments took a vast amount of time. Students spent hours on the phone compiling mailing lists. They also spent hours writing and revising letters, cover letters, memos, questionnaires, and reports. The students spent hours far in excess of what they would have spent in doing the exercises suggested at the end of the chapters in the assigned textbook. The difference was that this work seemed more significant, so they were willing to spend the extra time. None complained about the amount of time that had to be spent to do this project.

Lester Faigley and Thomas Miller's article, "What We Learn from Writing on the Job," in the October, 1982 issue of College English is a particularly telling study that examines the composition process as it is practiced by on-the-job writers in various white collar professions. Faigley and Miller interviewed a spectrum of professionals "to construct a broad picture of the writing of college-educated people in general, examining what they wrote both

on and off the job" (p. 558).

They concluded that:

> What we learn from asking about writing on the job is not just that writing is an important skill. We should know that. ....What we really learn are some insights into how diverse and complex writing is. We see that there are processes of composing rather than a composing process, and that these processes differ among writing tasks and media. Written reports often begin as oral presentations with visual aids, such as handouts and slides. One manager told us [Faigley and Miller] that he encourages his employees to use dictation for written work because they become more adept .. oral presentations. Indeed, we finally realized that our notion of writing imposed an artifical distinction upon the communication we were oberving (p. 569).

Indeed, the artificial distinctions to which Faigley and Miller refer create an unnatural barrier between typical classroom writing assignments and the writing that on-the-job writing practitioners must perform routinely--day by day, week by week, and month by month. On-the-job writing often involves, among other things, 1) joint authorship of proposals, 2) composition on a word processor, and 3) preliminary oral presentations of reports and proposals. Additionally, many different kinds of writing forms must be expediently managed in a short period of time. For example, it is not unusual for an on-the-job writer to produce a dozen memos, two dozen letters, a short report, a set of committee minutes, and other forms of writing all in the short space of one week.

Classroom assignments more often than not avoid written work involving joint authorship, composition involving a computer or word processor, and preliminary oral presentations involving handouts and visual aids. Furthermore, classroom assignments are usually covered in units with various kinds of memos, letters, and reports being taught, assigned, and graded in a discretely planned sequential order that permits no overlap.

When business writing instructors involve students in on-the-job writing projects, however, all of this changes. For example, my present business writing class is involved in five projects, four of which included the writing, distribution, collection, and tabulation of surveys. Three of these involve presenting an oral report of findings before various campus committees. A fourth project entails a survey of one hundred national corporations to determine what prospective employers look for in resumes and interviews. A fifth project, which was completed two weeks ago, involved writing a report, complete with a market study, on Purchase Money Equity Loans for a local savings association. This report was produced on a word processor to assure that students get an exposure to at least one sophisticated kind of information processing equipment. This particular assignment involved doing a great deal of work in a short period of time on a subject that was rather foreign to the students. But it, like other on-the-job writing assignments, was a challenge to which the students were equal. The students met in the evenings for extra sessions at the savings association, and completed the report in a timely and professional manner. The proposal will soon be considered by the board of directors, and the directors' reactions to the report will have an influence on the final grade for this project. But again, this work was real, so the students were willing to

spend extra time to complete it.

Getting students involved in the process of writing demands a great deal of work on the intructor's part. It is easy to find projects, but it is not easy to complete them. When students are asked to take a project seriously and do all of the work that is required, the instructor must obviously be available to assist the students during times other than the class periods and office hours. Instructors must also be willing to guide students through a process that is much more complex than simple teaching an assigned text and assigning end-of-chapter exercises. However, I think that there are few instructors who would not be willing to commit the time and energy to an approach that will enliven a business writing class and provide students with a meaningful experience from which they will learn the importance of the total business writing process.

Students today are very practical, and when they sense the practical value of a writing course, they are willing to work diligently. Emphasizing process and product is a good way to demonstrate to students the practical value and genuine complexity of business writing. But the fusion of process and product has yet another benefit. When students are involved in the process, they produce a superior product, and the production of a superior rpoduct is what teaching is all about.